DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 375 668 FL 022 521

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TITLE New Approaches to Language Teaching: An Overview. CLCS Occasional Paper No. 39.
INSTITUTION Trinity Coll., Dublin (Ireland). Centre for Language and Communication Studies.
REPORT NO ISSN-0332-3889
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 22p.
AVAILABLE FROM Centre for Language and Communication Studies, Trinity College, Dublin 2, Ireland.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communicative Competence (Languages); *Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; FLES; Foreign Countries; *Instructional Innovation; Language Attitudes; *Second Language Instruction; *Second Language Learning; Student Centered Curriculum; Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Communicative Approach; European Community; Task Oriented Instructions

ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the state of foreign language (FL) instruction in the European Community, the strengths and weakness of the communicative approach to FL instruction, and recent trends in FL teaching methods. The communicative approach, in widespread use since the 1970s, emphasizes the use of the target language in the classroom, deemphasizes grammar instruction, and stresses the use of authentic materials and exercises. This approach has been criticized, however, as being unrealistic, unsystematic, and beyond the capabilities of many students. Recent trends in FL instruction have tried to overcome these and other weaknesses of the communicative approach. The new approaches include task-oriented language learning, content-oriented language learning, cognitive language learning, process-oriented language learning, and learner autonomy. These new approaches are helping to move FL instruction away from an "instructivist," teacher-directed paradigm to an "instructivist," student-directed learning experience. (Contains 23 references.) (MDM)

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ED 375 668

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

Centre for Language and Communication Studies

# New approaches to language teaching: an overview

Dieter Wolff

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CLCS Occasional Paper No.39

ISSN 0332 3889

Summer 1994

FL022521

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CLCS Occasional Paper No.39
Summer 1994

# New approaches to language teaching: an overview[1]

by

Dieter Wolff

## 1 Introduction

The governments of the European Community, now the European Union, have repeatedly stressed the importance of a thorough knowledge of at least two foreign languages for all the citizens of the community. Only recently, in its *Memorandum on Higher Education* of 1991, the Commission of the European Communities declared:

> The Community has a rich diversity of languages and cultures, and the process of integration must be such as to preserve this diversity as it represents a storehouse of wealth which can contribute to the lives of all European citizens. The access to this storehouse, the mastery of other European languages combined with the knowledge of other European cultures, is part of the very essence and rationale of European union.
> (1991, p.12)

I think we all agree on the necessity of a good foreign language education for the younger generation; we also agree that all European citizens should have an active working knowledge of languages other than their mother tongue. We must ask ourselves, however, if it is possible to attain this aim with the political, financial and educational means actually at our disposal. Knowledge of foreign languages in most of the member states is still poor, at least in the larger countries, as recent surveys in France and Germany have shown. A number of factors are responsible for this state of affairs, among them (at least in Germany) the negative attitude

1 An earlier version of this paper was given as a public lecture in the Centre for Language and Communication Studies, Trinity term 1994.

towards foreign language learning among the general public, insufficient funding for schools and universities, the relatively high age of teachers, and the low standards of in-service teacher training.

I also believe, however, that mainstream foreign language teaching, at least in the larger countries of the community, is still characterized by a highly traditional approach, and that this is probably one of the most important reasons why we do not manage to reach the standards of language education we are aiming at. Not very long ago a colleague of mine cynically remarked that language teaching has not changed during the last hundred years and that it was not likely to change in the future, either. Even communicative language teaching, although highly acclaimed when it was introduced into the schools in the early 1970s, has lost most of its appeal and has been transformed into something very traditional by practising teachers, probably because they have not been convinced of its effectiveness.

It is interesting to note, however, that a number of new approaches to language learning have come up in recent years which are both practically oriented and in line with new developments in learning theory and the empirical results of second language acquisition research. Although these approaches focus on different aspects of the language learning process and are still a long way from being integrated into a new unified theory of foreign language learning, they share a number of concepts and assumptions, as I shall argue in greater detail below.

All of these approaches have something new to offer compared with mainstream versions of the communicative approach. Before surveying new impulses in the "post-communicative" era, however, I shall take a short look at the recent history of foreign language teaching from the perspective of the disciplines which contributed most to its development. I shall then focus briefly on the strengths and weaknesses of the communicative approach, and go on to characterize five new approaches which attempt to overcome these weaknesses: task-oriented learning, content-oriented learning, cognitive learning, process-oriented learning and (very briefly) learner autonomy. I shall conclude by suggesting that we are at present going through a very important paradigm shift in language teaching, a shift from "instructivism" to "constructivism".

## 2 Influences on recent developments in foreign language teaching

Foreign language teaching has always been interdisciplinary in its approach. Consequently it has always been influenced by the changes which have taken place within the disciplines related to it. I will try to show later that even the new approaches to language learning rely heavily on changes in these disciplines. Linguistics and psychology (especially psycholinguistics and the psychology of learning) are the disciplines that have exercised the greatest influence on language teaching and language learning.

This becomes obvious when we look at the first supposedly "scientific" approach to language teaching, the so-called audio-lingual method, which unites learning principles derived from behaviourism (habit formation, overlearning of structures) with principles of linguistic analysis (segmentation, classification, analysis of structures). According to this method foreign language learning is essentially a matter of rote learning structures via pattern drills; the meaning of the structures plays only a marginal role. The audio-lingual approach is form-oriented. It is interested mainly in the methodological aspects of language teaching, and the other components of the language classroom (for example, the learner or the thematic content of learning) are hardly taken into account.

The audiolingual approach was replaced in the 1960s, at least in the United States, by the so-called cognitive approach, which claimed that rule learning should replace the rote learning of structures. Knowledge of grammatical rules, it was argued, would enable the learner to form grammatically correct structures without having learned them by heart beforehand. In German foreign language teaching this approach has never played an important role, probably because principles of cognitive learning have always been present in German theories of language teaching. The dependence of this approach on generative linguistics, which sees language as rule-governed behaviour, is obvious. By the 1960s learning psychology had discarded the principles of behaviorism: human learning was seen, as today, as a cognitive operation in which processes of comprehension, retention, automatization and restructuring are of central importance. It should be pointed out, however, that the cognitive approach to language teaching focussed exclusively on

linguistic forms and structures. Only the linguistic code was held to be important in the learning process; no account was taken of the fact that language also has a communicative function and is embedded in a social context.

The next change in language teaching theory was prompted by an important shift in the linguistic paradigm. American sociolinguists transformed Chomsky's concept of linguistic competence (cf. Chomsky 1965) into the broader concept of communicative competence. Sociolinguists like Hymes (1974) argued that a competent speaker not only knows how to use linguistic forms correctly, but is also able to use language appropriately with respect to situation, addressee and register. Foreign language teaching theory, in Europe well prepared by the ideas of British linguists like Halliday (1973) and German philosophers like Habermas (Habermas and Luhmann 1971), took over these ideas gratefully and the communicative language teaching paradigm was born. Psychology did not play a major role in this change of paradigm, though it was to reassert its influence in the "post-communicative" period.

## 3 Communicative language teaching

Neither from a theoretical nor from a practical perspective does communicative language teaching present itself as one homogeneous approach. There are many different varieties, ranging from radical theoretical aproaches representing the "pure doctrine" to more traditional approaches which try to maintain established concepts and relate them to fundamental communicative principles. In school, at least in Germany, a fairly conventional type of communicative language teaching prevails which is still highly dependent on audiolingual and cognitive principles.

I take it that the following principles characterize mainstream versions of the communicative approach:

(i) Communication is of central importance in the foreign language classroom. Language learning is language use, as Ellis (1985) elegantly and succinctly puts it. This principle entails that the target language is the only or the principal means of communication in the classroom.

(ii) Classroom interaction consists to a large extent of negotiating

meaning and exchanging information. Linguistic form is not focussed upon. The structure of the target language is not taught explicitly; structural exercises, drills, etc. are avoided. Pre-communicative, quasi-communicative and communicative activities which aim at developing the learner's communicative competence are introduced instead. Role-plays and simulations are judged to be especially useful.

(iii) Textbooks, workbooks, etc. still exist but are supplemented by authentic materials — newspaper texts, literary texts, etc.

(iv) Mainstream versions of the communicative approach maintain, however, that in the classroom communicative interaction cannot be authentic. It may prepare for authentic interaction, but by definition it is not authentic in itself. That is why learners must understand from the very beginning the "do-as-if" character of the foreign language classroom (in Britain the term "willing suspension of disbelief" is used in this context).

These principles met with widespread incomprehension and resistance among foreign language teachers, especially as most teachers believe that they can hardly be put into practice in normal school conditions. From the talks I have had with a large number of language teachers and from my own classroom observations, I know that it is very difficult to transform these theoretical principles into practice. Five problems are mentioned with great frequency:

(i) Foreign language teachers have problems with the principle of using only the target language in the classrom. Many of them claim that the mother tongue must be used, especially when difficult grammatical questions are being dealt with. This is related to the second problem:

(ii) Foreign language teachers in general are convinced that learning a foreign language cannot take place without explicitly focussing on grammar. They claim that second language acquisition in school cannot be compared to the acquisition of a second language in natural contexts or the acquisition of one's mother tongue. The few teaching hours per week, they say, necessitate a systematic approach with

respect to the grammatical system of the foreign language.

(iii) Practical language teachers are even more sceptical with respect to the principle of replacing grammatical exercises by communicative activities. Grammar must not only be explained, they say, it must also be practised.

(iv) Many language teachers are very doubtful about the efficiency of group work. They believe that the teacher should always be in full control of what happens in the classroom, that he or she should be the only one to decide what should be done next. This attitude has, of course, something to do with teachers' feelings about their own value, but it can also be related to the fact that most teachers have not been prepared, during their own training, to handle group work.

(v) The principle that authentic materials should play a central role in the foreign language classroom is also seen negatively by many practising teachers. They are convinced that textbooks have at least one incontestable advantage: they offer a linguistic progression as regards grammar and the lexicon. Authentic texts, they argue, have different levels of difficulty and thus cannot contribute efficiently to the language learning process. They often add that using authentic texts means additional work for the teacher, since she or he has to choose the texts and prepare them before they can be used in the classroom.

From the point of view of the practising language teacher, then, communicative language teaching as conventionally understood is an approach which, on the whole, cannot be adopted in the language classroom. As a result many teachers have developed their own pedagogical approach, which includes those parts of the communicative approach they consider feasible, but on the whole gives preference to traditional ("reliable" and "trustworthy") principles of language teaching.

I turn now to those approaches to language teaching that seek to overcome shortcomings of the communicative approach as it has conventionally been understood. It is interesting to note that the critical remarks coming from theoreticians correspond to a large extent to what practising teachers have to say. Fortunately, however,

the theoreticians have not moved back towards traditional approaches but have introduced new ideas and new concepts.

## 4 New approaches in language learning

### 4.1 Common features of the new approaches

The new approaches developed during the last ten years are characterized by the fact that most of them have been established on ground prepared by the communicative approach. For example, they all accept the principle that language learning is language use. Most of the approaches, however, have also taken up problematic aspects of the communicative approach; some have even tried to respond to questions which were not asked, and therefore not answered, by the proponents of the communicative approach. And they have come up with interesting solutions. In other approaches attempts were made to develop new conceptual models. The solutions proposed in these approaches are sometimes more radical than in the communicative approach, but they are also more practicable and are soundly based on new psychological findings.

There can be no doubt that the developments reflected in these new approaches have been made possible by new findings in psycholinguistics and learning psychology. Some of these findings were already available when the communicative approach was founded, while others are the result of more recent research. Especially in psycholinguistics much progress has been made in recent years: first and second language acquisition research and research in language comprehension and production have contributed to a better understanding of language learning and language use. Social and cognitive psychology have also made considerable progress and have become important in questions dealing with learning in general and with language learning in particular.

A few examples will serve to show how the psychological disciplines have helped to verify and falsify certain assumptions of the communicative approach and how they have added new ideas that contribute to a better understanding of language learning:

Psycholinguistic research has shown, for example, that the assumption of the communicative approach that form-focussed exercises do not contribute to language learning is correct in principle (cf., for example, Ellis 1992). The main reason for the

limited value of such exercises lies in the fact that the manipulation of linguistic structures in formal exercises does not achieve the processing depth necessary to affect the learner's language system. Other research has taught us to treat role plays and simulations with a degree of scepticism and to reject the assumption that interactions in the classroom can never be authentic.

First and second language acquisition research claims that language learning must be seen as a process of creative construction and that there are severe constraints on the teachability of language (cf. Hyltenstam and Pienemann 1985). The importance of group work in language learning has been stressed both in second language acquisition research (peer corrections are more efficient than teacher corrections) and in social psychology (the face-saving nature of group work). It has also become clear, however, that group work is efficient only when the tasks the group has to fulfil are authentic. The authenticity of the interaction becomes a new and decisive principle in the discussion; the "willing suspension of disbelief" is falsified.

Another new idea is that learners should be equipped with learning techniques that will facilitate the learning process. This idea comes from language acquisition research and from learning psychology. Both first and naturalistic second language learners develop all kinds of strategies to cope with the difficult business of learning and processing language. This led to the conclusion that in the foreign language classroom such strategies should be focussed upon and promoted as conscious learning techniques (cf. Wenden and Rubin 1987). This idea is supported by learning psychology, which claims that learning is most efficient when the learner can organize his or her own learning process individually and autonomously.

The new approaches to language learning have taken up these and other ideas, as I shall try to show. Note that my order of presentation is not chronological: ideas were developed more or less simultaneously and are still being discussed, although they have already been put into practice.

### 4.2 Task-oriented language learning

Task-oriented language learning is an approach which is related to concepts like meaning-focussed activities and project work and to names like Prabhu (1987) and Legutke and Thomas (1991).

Task-oriented language learning is based on the conviction already expressed by Palmer (1921, p.44) "that in teaching a second language we must design forms of work in which the student's attention shall be directed towards the subject matter and away from the form in which it is expressed". According to Prabhu, in task-oriented language learning this change of perspective can be achieved if the tasks are of such a kind that only an implicit processing of the structure and the rules of the new language takes place. The learner learns the grammatical system of the new language because he performs authentic tasks.

Both Prabhu and Legutke and Thomas believe that task-oriented language learning is most efficient if it is embedded in project-work. Prabhu developed a large number of smaller projects and tasks, working with railway timetables, instructions, etc., whereas Legutke and Thomas set up larger projects lasting several weeks and sometimes several months. Examples are: the airport project, in which learners investigated the use of the target language at an international airport; the encounter project, in which learners were supposed to find out more about the life of target language minorities in their own country (for example, American and British soldiers in Germany); pen-pal projects, in which students prepared for a meeting with their pen-pals in the target language culture. In the context of our own work we have set up a telecommunications project concerned with manifestations of the target language in Germany, "the English language around us" (cf. Eck *et al.* 1994).

Task-oriented language learning focuses on two problems raised by the communicative approach: the authenticity of the materials and the authenticity of the interaction. It is assumed that learners learn the foreign language if they perform real-life activities. It is further assumed that authentic work with target language materials furthers the learning process. This accords with the demand of the communicative approach that linguistic form should not be focussed on in the classroom. The idea that language learning can take place only if classroom interactions are authentic is new and has assumed considerable importance in all recent discussions on language learning.

### 4.3 Content-oriented language learning

The term "content-oriented language learning" covers a

growing number of different approaches which, like task-oriented approaches, claim that learning is highly successful if the content of learning is authentic and compatible with the learner's existing world knowledge. In the context of this paper I should like to describe one variety of content-oriented language learning which has become quite popular in Germany in recent years, although a number of problems related to this approach have still to be solved. It is the concept of bilingual language learning.

Since the 1960s, both in Europe and in the United States and Canada, attempts have been made to promote bilingualism; that is, to develop a native-like competence in second language learners. Many different methods and procedures have been used — broadly, total immersion programmes in the United States and Canada and early language learning programmes in Europe. These latter programmes failed because traditional language teaching was simply advanced two or three years and the specific needs of younger children were not taken into account. The Canadian immersion programmes had to be modified because they did not take account of the fact that many Canadian children already speak one language besides English when they start to learn French. The Canadian experience, which is based on a policy of national bilingualism, cannot easily be transferred to the European context.

Since the beginning of the 1970s a number of schools in Germany have established so-called bilingual wings — in North Rhine-Westphalia, the largest state in the confederation, more than 70 grammar and secondary modern schools now have bilingual branches. In these bilingual branches one or two non-language subjects are usually taught through a foreign language. Before they take a non-language subject through a foreign language the students follow a two-year course in which the foreign language is taught seven to eight hours a week instead of the usual four hours. The non-language subjects taught are geography, biology, history, politics, and economics. The languages offered in the schools vary — French, English, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese are among the more common; in some schools courses are taught in Russian or even Polish (for more information see Weller and Wolff 1993).

In bilingual language learning two major problems have still to be solved:

(i) It is not clear what kind of language teaching should take place in the preparatory language course. Most of the teachers are very conventional in their approach. They make use of traditional forms of language teaching and hope that the higher number of contact hours will automatically lead to greater linguistic and communicative competence. New approaches have not yet been developed. It is not clear either in what way this preparatory course should prepare the students linguistically for the non-language subject. This is the problem of language for specific purposes.

(ii) There are not yet enough materials in the foreign language for the teaching of the non-language subject. Publishers are beginning to produce such materials, but most of the teachers still have to rely on their own materials. In some schools teachers are beginning to try out materials which were originally developed for native speakers of the target language.

The small amount of experience we have gathered with this specific type of content-based language learning shows, however, that by the time they leave school learners who follow this approach are much more competent in the foreign language than students who take conventional foreign language courses. This certainly has something to do with greater exposure to the foreign language, but it is probably also due to the fact that a content orientation predominates at least when the foreign language is used to deal with subject-specific and not with linguistic problems. The aim of learning is the acquisition of knowledge in a non-language subject rather than the acquisition of language: work with texts and interaction with other students and with the teacher becomes authentic. Language processing is deeper and the learning process is correspondingly more efficient.

### 4.4 Cognitive language learning

The cognitive approach does not seek to embrace the whole of language learning, though ideas about cognitive learning are present in a number of post-communicative approaches. When I discussed the problems teachers have with the communicative approach I mentioned that they believe that language teaching should also focus on linguistic form, that the linguistic system and

the grammatical rules of the foreign language should be part of the language teaching process. In cognitive language learning these beliefs are taken into consideration.

The ideas that underpin cognitive language learning originated in discussions that started in Britain in the mid-1980s in the context of native language learning in school. The term "language awareness" played an important role here. According to Pratt and Grieve (1984, p.2) language awareness is "the ability to think about and to reflect upon the nature and functions of language". According to a growing number of foreign language learning specialists, the promotion of language awareness should become an integral part of classroom activities. This must not be confounded, however, with traditional grammar teaching. Language awareness should be promoted through discovery learning, through the active exploration of the foreign language by the student (discovering linguistic regularities in the materials at the student's disposal, developing individual grammars, exploring linguistic phenomena in the student's environment, etc.). The promotion of language awareness, it is argued, makes the learning process more efficient. Language awareness can be extended to cultural awareness, i.e., promoting the student's ability to become aware of his or her own and the foreign culture.

Since the beginning of last school year the school authorities in North Rhine-Westphalia have been trying to promote language awareness in the primary school in order to prepare students for more successful foreign language learning at secondary level. This new approach is called the *Begegnungssprachenkonzept* ("language encounter approach"). Similar projects exist in the United Kingdom. In German primary schools the number of children with different native languages is very high — in a single class there are often students belonging to seven or eight different nationalities. In the language encounter approach it is assumed that language awareness can be promoted via a contrastive comparison of the different languages spoken in the classroom. Children learn to look at the languages of their peers. Although children learn language in this context, they mainly learn *about* language: the contrast with their own language is used to make them understand the functioning of language in general. Exploring and reflecting on language becomes a natural part of classroom activities and requires no special

justification. It is expected that the students will become better language learners as a result of becoming aware of the specific features and functions of language. Awareness-raising activities are activities which aim at promoting the learner's language learning abilities. (I should also mention here the *Lerne-die-Sprache-des-Nachbarn* approach, where primary school children from North Rhine-Westphalia spend days and sometimes whole weeks in partner schools across the border in Belgium or Holland. This approach embodies the same principles as the *Begegnungssprachenkonzept*).

It should have become clear that the focus on linguistic form advocated by proponents of language awareness does not entail a return to pre-communicative pedagogical practices. On the contrary, it constitutes a new approach to promoting knowledge about language and its functions. It effectively replaces the traditional grammar lesson and thus contributes to solving the problem of learning about language.

### 4.5 Process-oriented language learning

Like cognitive language learning, process-oriented language learning (cf. Multhaup and Wolff 1992) does not constitute a total language learning approach. The ideas which I would like to present under this heading are derived mainly from research findings in psycholinguistics. Although in communicative language teaching the importance of promoting language skills in the language learning process has always been underlined, this approach could never explain what these skills are and in what way they can be acquired. The four global skills of speaking, writing, listening and reading constitute complex mental processes which depend on linguistic knowledge but also on the use of specific language processing strategies. Listening and reading, for example, require inferencing strategies and strategies of elaboration which can contribute to understanding unknown words or phrases. Speaking and writing require strategies for planning, correction and revision.

Those approaches in which process-orientation is taken seriously assume that such strategies should be focussed upon consciously in the language learning process. Their functions should become a conscious element of classroom activities, so that learners learn how to use these strategies in the foreign language. But process-orientation in the foreign language classroom means even more than

this. It means a focus on the language learning process itself. Not only the strategies of language processing should be focussed upon in the classroom but also the strategies and processes of language learning. Learners should become conscious of their own learning processes and should learn to evaluate their efficiency. In this way their conscious learning strategies are developed and they are equipped with learning techniques which help them in their learning. Clearly, a learner who knows about the functions of different learning techniques can choose the techniques which fit best with his or her own learner type and learning style.

The focus on language processing strategies and learning techniques has an impact which goes far beyond communicative language teaching. The idea of enabling the learner to construct his own knowledge is something which will probably change foreign language teaching more than we can now imagine.

### 4.6 Learner autonomy

Learner autonomy is another concept which takes language learning beyond the communicative approach — and somehow it offers a framework which makes it possible to integrate all the approaches discussed so far.

Although the concept of learner autonomy is fairly old — it goes back to to the so-called Freinet pedagogy and to the *Reformpädagogik* of the first half of the 20th century — it became known in foreign language learning only at the beginning of the 1980s. Holec (1981) was the first theoretician seriously to discuss the concept of learner autonomy in the context of foreign language learning. He defined learner autonomy as the ability to take control of one's own learning, which entails being able to define one's learning aims, select the content and monitor the progression of one's learning, choose appropriate learning methods and techniques, and evaluate what has been learned.

Seen from this perspective teachers also have to take up a new role. They no longer control everything that happens in the classroom; their main function is to help the learners develop their autonomy. This is done by helping them to choose appropriate and adequate learning materials, by explaining learning strategies and techniques, by helping them to improve their evaluation processes. The creativity of the teacher becomes more important than his

knowledge about the language. This is very similar to what the communicative approach had to say about the role of the teacher.

Little (1991) provides a convincing theoretical foundation for the concept of learner autonomy. He defines learner autonomy as a general goal in education. The barriers between learning and life must be dismantled: learners must be enabled to transform "school knowledge" into "action knowledge" (Barnes 1976). Such a goal can only be attained if autonomy is focussed upon more prominently in education. If school knowledge cannot be transformed into action knowledge it will always be someone else's knowledge and cannot be integrated into our own personal constructs. Learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom is a step towards this general educational goal. Language knowledge will be acquired in such a context both as action knowledge and as analytical knowledge about the foreign language, and it will be integrated into the individual knowledge of the learner.

It is possible to integrate into learner autonomy most of the principles of language learning which could not be integrated into conventional communicative language teaching. Only authentic material chosen by the learner is used. The authenticity of the interaction is no problem because the language learning process and the evaluation of one's learning are the authentic themes of classroom interaction. The use of the foreign language in the classroom can be accepted by the students if they are made to understand that language is learned through language use and that in a foreign language classroom everyone should be interested in language learning. Group work can be accounted for by the fact that language learning is a highly complex process which demands procedures that can solve the problems encountered by individual learners.

As a global concept of language learning learner autonomy goes far beyond communicative language learning, however. Developing language awareness and focussing on language forms and functions are of the same importance as project work. Promoting language processing and language learning is as important as authentic materials and authentic interaction. In a way the concept of learner autonomy unites all the post-communicative approaches to language learning I have discussed.

## 5 "Instructivism" versus "constructivism"

Let me summarize my ideas by coming back to two concepts which I mentioned at the beginning of my paper: the terms "instructivism" and "constructivism". I have tried to show that the new ideas which are being discussed by theorists of language teaching are related to new advances in psychology: in cognitive psychology, in learning psychology, and in second language acquisition research (linguistics, by the way, seems to have lost much of its attraction for language teaching).

My general hypothesis about the present state of language teaching and learning is this: We are now entering a new era in teaching and learning in which fundamental changes will take place. These changes will not be simply methodological — an old method being replaced by a new one; they will be more general and radical. An "instructivist" paradigm in which teachers play the active role and learners are only recipients and are supposed to digest what their teachers teach them, will be replaced by a paradigm in which the students construct their own knowledge on the basis of their personal experience and in which teachers help them with their individual knowledge construction processes.

This fundamental change is being prompted by research findings in cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics, as I mentioned above. It has also been stimulated by findings in neurophysiology, biology and neuropsychology and other branches of cognitive science, and by new ideas in philosophy, for example, by radical constructivists like Maturana (Maturana and Varela 1987), von Glaserfeld (1989), and Schmidt (1986). All these findings make clear that human perception, comprehension and learning are complex cognitive processes which are different from what we imagined until recently. Radical constructivism, a more and more important current in modern philosophical thinking, claims that reality does not exist independently of man. Man creates the world around him and therefore it exists only subjectively in his brain. Cognitive science claims that man as an information-processing system constructs the world around him on the basis of his personal knowledge, and accordingly that all of us have different knowledge bases and go about the process of learning in general and language learning in particular in different ways. And the neurosciences have made clear that human information processing is not a simple process in which

the incoming information is processed serially, but a highly complex operation in which parallel and serial processes interact and in which the knowledge components necessary for the construction of an information item are called up in a way not yet fully understood.

All these ideas will lead disciplines dealing with learning and knowledge acquisition to look more thoroughly at learners' learning processes, their learning strategies and techniques. They will lead them to promote activities which help learners to become conscious of these strategies. They will also lead them to help learners to understand their own learning process. Knowledge acquisition cannot be seen as an instructional process; it is an autonomous construction process which cannot be enforced but only assisted by the teacher. I firmly believe that the instructivist will soon be replaced by a constructivist paradigm, which will focus on the learner and the learning process rather than the teacher and the teaching process.

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